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## **The importance of sampling: Building complementary insights about reception experiences of *The Hobbit* film trilogy with different survey sampling strategies**

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### **Abstract:**

The worldwide survey of the experiences of *The Hobbit* trilogy (spring 2015) has enabled the participating researchers from 46 countries to explore the reception of these international blockbusters from a variety of perspectives to do with global audiences, national readings, language cultures, gender, age, etc. The research carried out in Denmark additionally enabled the researchers to analyze in detail the consequences of adopting two different kinds of sampling strategies: In Denmark, in addition to the online self-selected convenience sample, we also had a market research company recruit a controlled quota sample, which is near-representative of Danish cinema-goers. These two samples filled out identical questionnaires.

This setup enabled us to explore the methodological consequences of building a questionnaire-based reception analysis on, respectively, a sample which is representative of 'ordinary' Danish cinema-goers, and a sample arising from the recruiting efforts of the research team through email lists, websites, and networks in social media, mainly Facebook. The network-based convenience sample can be seen as a 'fannish' population consisting of more committed and enthusiastic viewers than those recruited in the systematic quota sample.

In this article we first analyze the two samples based on their demographic profiles. Next, based both on the closed and the qualitative questions in the questionnaire, we make a comparative analysis of the two samples' responses to do with people's motivations for seeing the *Hobbit* films, the genre-labels they attach to the films, their perception of fantasy fiction, whether they have read *The Hobbit* novel, etc. These variables are analyzed in relation to age and gender.

Among the key findings are that the two sample groups are often unanimous about which experiences are most salient, but the two groups differ, sometimes significantly, with respect to the relative strength of these experiences. Moreover, fandom appears to have a consistent levelling effect on the film-related views and activities between age groups, while among ordinary cinema-goers there are systematic differences differentiating the experiences of groups defined by age demographics. An analysis of the content and length of respondents' qualitative explanations of the grades they award to the films suggests that their different argumentative stances may originate in fanish audiences feeling a more urgent need to provide elaborate reasons for their disappointment.

In addition to shedding light on the diverse experiences of a global blockbuster film trilogy, the article enlightens the research community about the methodological consequences of applying different sampling strategies in cultural research.

**Keywords:** audiences; reception research; comparison of methods; sampling; fan fiction

The proverbial phrase '*Thinking without comparison is unthinkable*' offers a truth which should be a daily reminder to cultural analysts.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the World Hobbit Project, different forms of cultural comparison are the whole *raison d'être* of the analytical enterprise, as the rich data in dozens of languages and from even more countries lends itself to comparative analysis of national audience experiences of this Hollywood blockbuster; comparative analysis of clusters of countries (for instance comparing the ways people in secular Northern Europe make sense of the film's spiritual textual dimensions with the readings of viewers in the catholic Mediterranean south); comparisons of those who have read Tolkien's book with those who have not, and innumerable other types of comparison.

As the Danish participants in the Hobbit Project, we have taken the opportunity to add a comparative dimension which takes a methodological path. We decided to supplement the common method of data collection in the project as a whole (which can roughly be labelled convenience sampling, see below) with a parallel strategy (a form of quota sampling with representative groups). This was done in order to build two different sets of insights about Danish cinema-goers' experience of *The Hobbit*, based on different sampling strategies conceptualized as different lenses for observing readings that are anchored in the same national cultural context. Our two samples were asked to respond to the same battery of questions, i.e. the questionnaire developed by the World Hobbit Project group for the worldwide study.

## **The World Hobbit Project: knowledge interests and methods**

For the benefit of the readers of this particular article we shall first briefly and selectively summarize the framework of the World Hobbit Project, of which a fuller account is offered in the project directors' Introduction to this Themed Section. Based on the central research question 'In what ways does something originating as an English children's story acquire meaning and value for different audiences across the world?', the project was designed to answer five subsidiary questions:

- How are responses to the story related to age, sex, relative income, nationality, and reading experience?
- How do different prior interests (e.g. in Tolkien's work, or in Jackson's films) shape people's engagements?
- How do different audiences understand the *kind of* film it is, and how do these understandings relate to their interpretive strategies (for example, attending to and valuing particular elements of the story)?
- How do audiences relate their responses to wider (real, digital, virtual or imagined) communities? And how does 'fandom' function in relation to this semi-literary, middlebrow form of culture?
- What criteria underpin different evaluations of the film, and how do these become visible within people's responses?<sup>2</sup>

These questions were operationalized into a common online questionnaire with 29 questions translated into more than 30 languages and publicized in 46 countries. Due to the limited funding for the project, it adopted an online recruiting strategy in order to reach as wide a range of people around the world as possible. The questionnaire combined quantitative (multiple-choice) and qualitative (open-ended) questions in order to be able to both generate complex patterns of viewers' experiences and to solicit through the respondents' own words some of the cultural meanings triggered by the trilogy. Launched after the cinema release of the third film of the trilogy in December 2014, the global survey's only requirement of respondents was that they must have seen at least one of the three films.

The publicizing of the questionnaire was done through email lists, websites, web forums, chatrooms, social networking sites and the like, in the hope of getting at least a thousand responses per country. The recruiting strategy was thus a case of *convenience sampling*: 'a convenience sample is one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility' (Bryman 2001:97). It is a well-known property of convenience samples that 'the findings may prove quite interesting, but (...) it is impossible to generalize the findings, because we do not know of what population this sample is representative' (Bryman 2001: 97).

This survey dissemination strategy was supplemented by snowball sampling, in which ‘the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contact with others’ (Bryman 2001: 98). These related sampling strategies are similar in tending to produce uncontrolled samples of self-selected individuals with special motivations in relation to the survey topic, whose composition in terms of demographic and other characteristics is left to chance.

This sampling strategy was deliberately chosen by the project due to the opportunities for particular kinds of insights it offered. In this respect the World Hobbit Project replicated the knowledge interests and methods used by the global *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) project, also a Hollywood blockbuster based on fantasy novels by JRR Tolkien, which was directed by the same researchers (Barker and Mathijs, 2008; Mathijs, 2006). The LOTR project also

did not seek to recruit a ‘sample’. One pragmatic reason was that it would simply have been impossibly complicated and expensive to try. But just as importantly, we believed that the idea of a ‘sample’ was inappropriate to the questions we sought to answer. We were not doing a commercial satisfaction study. We were not seeking generalisations about the audience. We were trying to understand the range of ways in which the film, and the story from which it came, might become meaningful to different groups of people. For this reason, we recruited opportunistically, aiming to populate all the questionnaire’s categories as richly as we could, so that we could then examine the connections and separations between categories – and then explore how people in all those groups *talked* about their reactions.<sup>3</sup>

The *Hobbit* survey was widely and energetically publicized by the researchers across the world, supported by a public relations toolkit developed by the directors. This toolkit provided suggested wordings for press releases to the media, mainstream as well as in relevant niches like film magazines, and ‘hooks’ aimed at getting individuals from other relevant contexts to spread the word. For instance, the ‘hook’ sent to academic colleagues in the cultural and social sciences asked them to ‘help us in simple ways’:

- By completing the survey yourself, of course, if you have seen the films.
- By passing on this information to students, colleagues, family, friends, and asking them to do the same.
- By mentioning and pointing to the project’s address in blogs, postings, and conversations.
- By mentioning the project and showing the link on Facebook and the like, so that it is as widely visible as we can possibly make it.<sup>4</sup>

The desire to attract fans as respondents was manifested in the 'Fansite hook' invitation, which both flattered fans by saying that their responses would be particularly valuable to the analysis and urging fans to recruit fellow fans:

We're reaching out because we especially want to hear from fans, to learn how your fan interests impacted on your appreciation of the movie (or not!). We're also generally interested in what brings viewers to these *Hobbit* films, and what they make of them.

Please help us by completing <our questionnaire, link provided>: we really want fans to be strongly represented in our findings (...).

Also, please do share the questionnaire link with your fellow fans, to make sure that fans around the globe have as much of a voice in this international research project as possible. The more people who take part, the more accurate our sense of fan diversity – and shared views – will be.<sup>5</sup>

Such invitations were sent to the fan sites and mailing lists of fan communities gathered around passions for *The Hobbit*, for Tolkien's work, and for fantasy and science fiction books and films generally. The invitation to fill out the questionnaire thus most likely reached online fora populated by these kinds of fans, who can be defined as 'persons who have a significantly higher degree of psychological engagement with an 'object' and relational engagement with others who are also engaged, than persons who are passively involved, interested but inactive, or largely indifferent' (Davis et al. 2016: 106). In addition to such devoted viewers of the *Hobbit* films, it is likely that the respondent group also includes individuals whose interest in *The Hobbit* films is above average, but who don't have very deep roots in the fan community and whose viewing experience is therefore not likely to be influenced by the shared specialist knowledge of a fan culture: Davis et al. label such viewers 'fannish consumers'; they 'may enact fandoms more closely resembling a hobby or style of consumption (Davis et al. 2016: 106).

However, the project combined the fan invitation with a request to fans to also spread the word in their online networks of non-fan friends:

So you're a fan of *The Hobbit* – whether because of Tolkien, or Peter Jackson, or Martin Freeman, or just fantasy films generally. (...) You have probably already visited and completed our questionnaire at [www.worldhobbitproject.org](http://www.worldhobbitproject.org) (if not, what are you waiting for??). But what do the 'others', the non-fans – the ones who miss so much, think of it. Help us get clearer idea what are the real differences between fans and others, by encouraging your relatives <and> friends to complete the questionnaire.<sup>6</sup>

While there is no certain knowledge about the extent to which these sampling strategies were used across the 46 countries, we believe it is fair to say that although the study cannot by any means be characterized as ‘a fan study’, nevertheless the global sample gathered by the World Hobbit Project was solidly based in fan communities and among people who are ‘fannish’ in a looser sense. The analysis of a sample built through such sampling methods therefore cannot say anything about the typical mode of experience in a wider culturally defined community such as a national culture.

The Danish sample that resulted from this global sampling approach on the whole shares the fan or fannish bias described above. It is necessary to discuss what precisely we mean by ‘the Danish sample’, because in the global sample the ‘Danish’ subsample is defined by the following characteristics: 1) respondents who filled out the questionnaire in Danish; 2) respondents who answered that they live in Denmark; 3) respondents who answered that they are Danish citizens. For our comparative purpose, individuals with all of these characteristics are defined as Danish, a total of 844 individuals in our study, which makes the Danish part of the global convenience sample comparable with the quota sample (see below).

When recruiting this sample, the Danish research team made an effort to reach beyond fans or fannish groups, as we publicized the study in general-interest online fora such as the widely read online popular science portal *Videnskab.dk* and the online magazine *Kommunikationsforum*, which serves as a significant trade journal for communication professionals in Denmark. We also disseminated the invitation to a number of Danish high-school teachers, some of whom were teachers of film and media; these teachers were asked to spread the questionnaire to colleagues and students, for instance on the schools’ student communication systems.

The community of film fans was reached through the website and Facebook community of the Danish film magazine EKKO. At the end of the day, though, those who encountered the invitation to participate in the study and who then self-selected to become respondents are likely to be above-average motivated to do so, in contrast to individuals from the category of ordinary cinema-goers.

Casting a side-glance at the World Hobbit Project’s parallel ‘sister study’ carried out by Charles Davis, Carolyn Michelle, Ann Hardy and Craig Hight (Davis et al. 2016), which used a Q methodological survey to build audience reception repertoires, these implications of using a mixed convenience-and-snowball sampling approach are confirmed. For instance in their prefigurative analysis of pre-release audience groups, prior to the premiere of the first film of the Hobbit trilogy in December 2012, the audience repertoires they found consist heavily of fans: The repertoire labelled ‘eager and enthusiastic fans of Jackson’s LOTR film trilogy’ includes 48% fans of the Hobbit book or of JRR Tolkien, 36% fans of the LOTR films, and 8% fans of one of the stars in the upcoming Hobbit film (Davis et al. 2016: 114). Similarly the repertoires they found in connection with the reception experience of the first *Hobbit* film can be seen to map clusters of audience readings that originate in fans or fannish cinema-goers recruited across the globe. Such readings are interesting as



culturally significant modes of reception, but their anchorage in and relation to spatio-temporal scenarios or to the wider *Hobbit* audience is uncertain.

As methods textbook author Alan Bryman phrases this position in more general methodological terms, commenting on the use of convenience samples through online fora and email lists: 'If representativeness is not a significant concern for the researcher, the fact that it is possible to target groups that have a specific interest or form of behavior makes such lists and sites an attractive means of contacting sample members' (Bryman 2016: 192).

### **The parallel Danish *Hobbit* Audience Study**

When in 2013 we were invited to participate in the World Hobbit Project, we enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to be part in a global project with the cultural objectives and on the methodological premises outlined above. Because one of us had been the Danish investigator in the *LOTR* project (Jerslev 2006), one reason for joining was the wish to build cultural continuity in our understanding of worldwide, Hollywood blockbuster-based film experiences among the Danes compared with the understandings across a variety of national and language cultures. The following section therefore provides a brief summary of the Danish findings from the *LOTR* project, which we will draw on below in a comparison with the findings from the Hobbit Project. A second reason for joining the new project had to do with an interest in mapping the *Hobbit* experiences of Danish audiences in a way that would enable us to get a representative picture of these experiences as anchored in the national culture of a population united by a common language. The sampling strategy we followed to pursue this aim is described after the presentations of the Danish *LOTR* findings.

### ***Building continuity of cultural analysis: Brief outline of LOTR experiences in Denmark***

The World Hobbit Project resembles the earlier International *Lord of the Rings* Audience Project (conducted 2003-2004) in terms of research questions and method; however it is larger in scope, including many more countries, in contrast to the earlier project, which studied the launch and reception of the third *Lord of the Rings* film, *The Return of the King* in 20 different countries, including Denmark.<sup>7</sup> *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* world-premiered in Wellington, New Zealand on December 1, 2003. After spectacular gala premieres in Berlin and London on December 10 and 11, but in tandem with the release of the film in a range of countries, among which was Denmark, the *Lord of the Rings* world research project web-questionnaire was launched on December 17. The completed questionnaires archived in The *Lord of the Rings* World Audience Database provided the main data of this large international collaborative project (documented for instance in Barker and Mathijs (eds.), 2008 and Mathijs (ed.), 2006).<sup>8</sup>

The project included the collection of three kinds of data by the national research teams: first, prefigurative material such as marketing material and press coverage; second



the online questionnaire combining multiple choice answers with free text response possibilities; and third, follow-up interviews with selected questionnaire respondents. When access to the online questionnaire closed by the end of May 2004, the worldwide database comprised 22,486 completed responses (see Mathijs, 2006). Moreover, some of the national research teams also distributed paper versions of the questionnaire, making questionnaire completions a total of 24,739 (Barker, Mathijs & Trobia, 2008: 222) with the number of responses exceeding 500 in twelve countries, including Denmark (Barker & Mathijs, 2012).

The overall idea of the project was to study 'the impact of a Hollywood product on actual local audiences' (Barker, Egan, Jones & Mathijs, 2008: 7), however with a focus on the fantasy genre, its projected worlds and its appeal. The questionnaire was constructed in order to be able to provide answers to three research questions; first, the question about the function of fantasy for different audience segments and what kind of fantasy world respondents imagined the film to project; second, the question of the influence of marketing material and other kinds of advance writing about the film on audiences' perceptions and evaluations of the film; and finally, what audiences would think of the films' transnationalism: a Hollywood adaptation of English author J.R.R. Tolkien's work taking place in New Zealand landscapes (Barker, Mathijs & Trobia, 2008; Barker, Egan, Jones & Mathijs, 2008).

The Danish sample comprised 1623 answers in total, 1496 of whom filled out the online questionnaire. A paper version of the questionnaire was handed out to cinemagoers in major Copenhagen cinemas before and after screenings on the days following the premiere (including a stamped return envelope) resulting in 127 completions.<sup>9</sup>

Like the world sample, the Danish respondents showed great enthusiasm for the film. 63% found it 'extremely enjoyable' and 28% 'very enjoyable' (compared to the overall results, which were even more enthusiastic: 71% of the world sample thought *The Return of the King* was 'extremely enjoyable' and 21% 'very enjoyable'). In the Danish sample, 48% thought it was 'extremely important' to see the film compared to the world sample's 60%; 38% found it 'very important' in contrast to the world audience's 24%.

Almost identical to the world responses, 86% of the Danish respondents had seen the first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, more than once, and also similar to the world profile, 80% of the Danish respondents had seen the second film, *The Two Towers*, more than once. For 54% of the Danish respondents, Tolkien's books were the most important reason to watch the film (respondents were asked: 'What was the main source of your expectation?'); the world profile showed even more interest in the books; here the number amounted to 60%. The second most important reason to watch the film was the first two parts of Peter Jackson's trilogy (37% Danes, 33% in the world total); both internationally and nationally the director, a game associated with the film or one of the stars were of almost no importance when explaining why respondents chose to watch the film (under 2% of answers). Regarding the question of the kind of story *The Return of the King* could be said to narrate, the three most chosen descriptions overall were 'epic', 'good vs. evil' and 'fantasy' (respectively 19%, 16% and 15% - respondents could choose up to three answers) and

'spiritual journey', 'threatened homeland' and 'war story' the least chosen (respectively 3%, 3% and 3%). In Denmark, 'good vs evil' was the most frequently chosen term (18% of respondents), followed by 'fairytale' (16%) and 'epic' (15%), with 'fantasy coming in fourth on a par with 'myth/legend' (13%). The least chosen terms by the Danish questionnaire completers were also 'war story' (3%), 'threatened homeland' (2%) and 'spiritual journey'/'quest' (both 5%).<sup>10</sup> The *LOTR* study thus bore testimony to a huge success, an immense fondness for all three films, which cinemagoers would happily see more than once, and for Tolkien's books, which exceeded the first two parts of the trilogy as reasons for going to the cinema.

### ***Designing a fan neutral study of The Hobbit trilogy in Denmark***

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, we wanted to use our participation in The World Global Hobbit Project as an opportunity to pursue our interest in mapping the *Hobbit* experiences of Danish audiences in a way that would enable us to get a demographically representative picture of these experiences as anchored in the national culture of a population united by a common language. We therefore managed to get our respective universities to provide the small funding required for commissioning an online survey from a market research company.<sup>11</sup>

We wanted the survey to be representative not in the sense of matching the standard demographic groupings in the Danish population as a whole, but constructing a sample which aimed to be near-representative of Danish cinema-goers, and in which Hobbit- and Tolkien-related fandom would be represented as randomly as it is in the Danish cinema-going public. As mentioned above, this representative study would apply the exact same questionnaire as the fannish sample. As a consequence, we would be able to systematically probe the effects of applying two different methods of knowledge building in the same area of cultural consumption.

To this end we adopted a quota-sampling approach. In the literature, a quota sampling strategy aims to 'produce a sample that reflects a population in terms of the relative proportions of people in different categories, such as age, ethnicity, gender (...). The choice of respondents is left to the interviewer, subject to the requirements of all quotas being filled (...)' (Bryman 2001: 99-100). Our quota sampling is a semi-quota sampling strategy which has the purpose of achieving a close match to selected age groups each containing approximately 175 individuals: 15-29 years, 30-49 years and 50 years or above in the Danish population. In each age group subjects were randomly selected from a market research panel and contacted by invitation to an online questionnaire. Only respondents who had seen at least one of *The Hobbit* films were recruited, which amounted to 544 persons. The respondents met the same criteria as the convenience sample: responded in Danish language, live in Denmark and are Danish citizens. Because each quota was recruited in a demographically neutral manner, we may assume that this sample's proportions of other variables (such as the proportion of *Hobbit* and Tolkien fans) correspond to those of the Danish population as a whole.

Young people are known to visit cinemas more often and generally to consume audiovisual products, including feature films, on DVDs and through streaming more often than older groups (Ministry of Culture, *Report on the Danes' cultural habits* 2012: 58-59). Therefore we aimed to recruit a sample in which young people were to some extent over-represented.

**Table 1** shows the proportions of the three age groups of the quota sample, the convenience sample, and the Danish population over 15 years. The young age group can be seen to be to some extent over-represented in the fan-neutral quota sample (+7 percentage points) as intended in relation to the Danish population, and to be considerably over-represented in the fannish convenience sample (+20 percentage points). The middle age group is slightly over-represented in both samples (+3 vs. +7 percentage points), while the old group, as intended, is considerably under-represented in the quota sample (-10 percentage points) and is heavily underrepresented the convenience sample (-27 percentage points).

**Table 1:** Comparison of two Danish *Hobbit* respondent samples and the Danish population 15+, 2015

Demographics	Convenience sample		Quota sample		Danish population	
15-29 years	367	43%	164	30%	1,104,929	23%
30-49 years	318	38%	186	34%	1,466,580	31%
50+ years	159	19%	194	36%	2,185,598	46%
Men	507	60%	297	55%	2,843,085	50%
Women	340	40%	247	45%	2,873,929	50%
Total	844	100%	544	100%	4,757,107	100%

With respect to gender, the balance between men and women in the quota sample is 55% men vs. 45% women, and in the convenience sample 60% men vs. 40% women, whereas the population counts 49.73% men and 50.27% women. Neither sample thus meets our aim of matching the population in this respect.

Our knowledge about the frequency of cinema-going is based on the secondary data provided by the Ministry of Culture's report on *The Danes' cultural habits* (2012), which, however, does not identify such a thing as 'the typical Danish cinema-goer', and which cannot therefore be directly related to the proportions of the age groups in our two samples. Looking at **Table 2** and focusing especially on the three categories of having visited a cinema 1-2 times, 3-5 times, and more than 6 times, we note that women are somewhat more likely to have seen 3 or more films than men. Both our samples therefore do not represent female cinema-goers adequately, as they should have included a slight over-representation of women in order to do so. The quota sample is less skewed with respect to gender than the convenience sample.

**Table 2:** How often people in Denmark go to the cinema 2012 (age and gender)\*

	Men	Women	15-19 yrs	20-29 yrs	30-39 yrs	40-49 yrs	50-59 yrs	60-69 yrs	70+	All
Never	13%	10%	4%	3%	2%	5%	10%	17%	28%	12%
More than 1 year ago	24%	19%	7%	8%	16%	19%	31%	26%	25%	22%
1-2 times last year	28%	28%	27%	27%	36%	38%	25%	24%	23%	28%
3-5 times last year	22%	26%	36%	36%	33%	29%	20%	18%	15%	24%
6+ times last year	11%	16%	24%	26%	12%	10%	14%	14%	8%	14%
Don't know	1%	1%	2%	1%	-	-	1%	1%	1%	1%
Total										100%

\***Source:** Ministry of Culture, Report on the Danes' cultural habits 2012.

With respect to age, the young group 15-29 years is more likely to have seen 6 films or more than both of the older groups 30-49 years and 50+ years. The young and the middle age groups are almost equally likely to have seen 3-5 films, in contrast to the old group 50+ who are considerably more likely to just have seen one film – or indeed none at all. However, the old group is more likely to have seen 6 or more films than the middle group, who are more likely to have been to the cinema 1-2 times than both the young and the old group.

Just how these film consumption figures could have been precisely reflected in the proportions of our study's three age groups is difficult to tell. The conclusion we drew from holding these population- and cinema-going statistics together (**Tables 1 and 2**) is that the controlled quota sample matches both the Danish population and Danish cinema-goers somewhat better than the self-selected convenience sample, which significantly over-represents the young, as well as men, in both respects (population and cinema-going).

With respect to the representation of 'fans' and 'fannish' cinema-goers in the two samples, the convenience sampling strategy described above (not least the deliberate 'Fansite hook' strategy) makes it likely that substantial numbers of fans and fannish individuals have encountered the online questionnaire, and have self-selected for filling it out.

By contrast, in the recruiting of the quota sample, because each age quota was recruited in a demographically neutral manner, the presence of other variables in each age quota (such as the proportion of Hobbit and Tolkien fans) is likely to correspond more closely to those of this age group in the Danish population as a whole.

Therefore, we can safely assume that fans of the world of Tolkien in books and films are present in culturally average proportions in the quota sample, while the convenience sample of the World Hobbit Project is over-populated by them.

When studying our two samples using identical questionnaires we are therefore in a position to systematically compare the cultural insights provided by the two parallel samples in Denmark, and thus to create new knowledge about the analytical outcomes offered by, respectively, a convenience + snowball sample and a quota sample.<sup>12</sup>

## Analyzing the *Hobbit* film experience of Danish cinema-goers: comparing fan-neutral and fannish perspectives

In the following analysis we concentrate on the answers to the multiple-choice questions in the questionnaire (see the complete questionnaire in the project directors' introduction to the special issue). In order to get an impression of some of the cultural meanings that people attach to their film experiences, we also analyze their qualitative answers to the open question at the beginning of the questionnaire, where following upon the request (Q1) for respondents to rate their experience from 'excellent' to 'awful' people were asked (Q2) 'Can you sum up your response to the films in your own words?'

### Question 1: 'What did you think of the *Hobbit* films overall?'

It is clear that the convenience sample is considerably more enthusiastic about the *Hobbit* trilogy than the fan-neutral quota sample: 40% of the convenience sample found the films 'excellent', 9 percentage points higher than the quota sample's 31%. However, in both groups the more reserved 'good' rating dominated, but such that the groups who found the films 'excellent' and 'good' were almost equal in size (40% and 44%) in the quota sample, as opposed to the convenience sample's 31% and 50%. The two groups have near-similar numbers of people who rated the films 'Average' and lower.

**Table 3:** Ratings of *The Hobbit* films\*: Samples compared

	15 to 29 years		30 to 49 years		50 years or above		All	
	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota
Awful	1%	1%	2%	1%	-	-	2%	1%
Poor	3%	6%	6%	2%	2%	5%	4%	4%
Average	8%	16%	14%	14%	12%	13%	10%	14%
Good	43%	51%	43%	55%	46%	44%	44%	50%
excellent	43%	26%	35%	29%	40%	38%	40%	31%
Total resp.	367	164	318	186	159	194	844	544

\*Question: 'What did you think of *The Hobbit* films overall?'

In the quota sample enthusiasm differs proportionately with age, with 12 percentage points separating 'Excellent' in the young group (26%) and the old group (38%), while in the convenience sample it is the middle group (35%) who are somewhat less enthusiastic than the young (43%) and the old group (40%). In both samples women (respectively 36% and 46%) were significantly more enthusiastic than men (respectively 27% and 35%)<sup>13</sup>. In other words, we see that in Denmark the fannish audience tended to embrace *The Hobbit* trilogy more happily than the average cinema-goers, a pattern that can be traced to the ratings of female and young viewers.

**Question 3: Please choose *up to three* reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films, from among the following (...)<sup>14</sup>**

The two sample groups are unanimous in giving the three main reasons for seeing the films, in the same order, agreeing that reasons C ('love of Tolkien's work'), F ('love of fantasy films generally'), and I ('having read the book') are key motivations drawing them to cinemas and domestic screens (see **Table 4**). But the two groups differ with respect to the relative strength of these reasons: In the convenience sampled group, these three reasons are given by C: 68%, F: 50%, and I: 48% of the respondents, while in the quota-sampled group the percentages are C: 49%, F: 34%, and I: 32%. The attachment to Tolkien's work, and the book *The Hobbit*, is thus very much stronger in the fannish group (more of whom have read the book, see the analysis of Q17 below), who are also a lot more into the fantasy genre. The two Tolkien-anchored motivations (C and I) are clearly proportional with age in the quota sample, while this is only the case for motivation I: 'having read *The Hobbit*' among the convenience sample. Among the fans there are only slight differences in proportions among age groups with respect to loving Tolkien's work. In both samples, larger groups among the young and middle-aged say that they love the fantasy genre as such.

The gender preferences on the whole correspond to the general pattern, with two notable differences: in the quota sample as many men pick the more general reason D (liking to see big new films when they come out) as pick reason I. ('having read the book') (32%). In the convenience sample, almost a third of the women provide reason L. ('an actor that I particularly like was in them') (27%), as opposed to only 9% of the women in the quota sample giving this reason.

Significantly, in the convenience sampled group almost a fifth of the total (17%), and 26% of the men say that they wanted to see the films because they are 'connected to a community that has been waiting for the films' (reason B); although we cannot know for certain, it appears likely that this 'community' is some kind of Tolkien-related fan community. In the quota sample a mere 6% give this motivation.

Among other notable motivations for seeing the films, a third of the quota sample (31%) just 'like to see big films when they come out' (reason D), while this reason is not so important to the fannish sample (24%).

Summing up on the answers to Question 3, it stands out that knowledge of and liking of Tolkien's universe are the most important reasons why many people have seen the films; these motivations are especially salient in the fannish convenience sample, almost a fifth of whom belong to a community, presumably of a fannish nature. For the fan-neutral group, while the relative strength of the Tolkien motivation was significantly weaker, the sheer like to see big films was an added reason for seeing the *Hobbit* films.

**Table 4:** Reasons for viewing *The Hobbit* films\*: Samples compared

	15 to 29 years		30 to 49 years		50 years or above		All	
	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota
A. I wanted to experience their special features (eg. high frame rate. 3D)	22%	13%	20%	17%	18%	18%	20%	16%
B. I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films	26%	10%	12%	5%	8%	4%	17%	6%
C. I love Tolkien's work as a whole	66%	38%	68%	49%	72%	57%	68%	49%
D. I like to see big new films when they come out	24%	34%	29%	35%	13%	26%	24%	31%
E. I wanted to be part of an international experience	3%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%
F. I love fantasy films generally	52%	37%	55%	40%	31%	27%	50%	34%
G. There was such a build-up. I had to see them	11%	24%	3%	17%	3%	16%	7%	18%
H. I was dragged along	6%	20%	6%	12%	6%	10%	6%	14%
I. I knew the book. and had to see what the films would be like	38%	19%	55%	31%	59%	45%	48%	32%
J. I love Peter Jackson's films	23%	12%	16%	13%	13%	10%	18%	12%
K. No special reason	-	4%	1%	4%	3%	5%	1%	4%
L. An actor that I particularly like was in them:	25%	12%	12%	5%	15%	8%	18%	8%
Total respondents							844	544

\* Question: 'Please choose *up to three* reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films, from among the following...'

**Question 4: Which of the following labels come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three**

The two samples on the whole agree on which genre labels they think fit the Hobbit films (see **Table 5**). Not surprisingly, the label F: 'Part of Tolkien's legend-world' is preferred over any other, with 54% of the quota sample and 66% of the convenience sample choosing this label. Again, as with Question 3 (above) we can see that the strength of this preference is higher in the fannish community as a whole, and more level across the fannish age groups. The two samples differ with respect to the second-ranked most fitting label, where almost two thirds of the convenience sample (60%) invoke genre label C: 'World of fantasy' as opposed to only one third of the quota sample (29%), which has the genre label B: 'Fairytale' in second place (with 47%, as opposed to 39% in the convenience sample). Lower



on the list of both groups are the labels M: 'Stunning locations' and L: 'Literary adaptation', with very similar percentages across samples.

Among the ordinary cinema-goers there are only slight differences in relation to age across most of the genre labels. However, F: 'Tolkien's legend-world', is significantly more common among the old group (63%), than among the young (44%) and the middle group (54%). This is not paralleled in the fannish sample, where there are only slight differences between the three age groups in relation to the label 'Tolkien's legend-world', as well as to the other high-ranked labels. It is noticeable that the two older groups in the quota sample are more taken aback by the films' use of spectacular special effects (the label 'Digital novelty cinema') than the young group, for whom this is probably more of a taken-for-granted attraction.

**Table 5:** Labelling *The Hobbit* film\*: Samples compared

	15 to 29 years		30 to 49 Years		50 years or above		All	
	Conve nience	Quota	Conve nience	Quota	Conve nience	Quota	Conve nience	Quota
A Children's story	2%	1%	1%	-	1%	-	1%	-
B Fairytale	42%	49%	41%	52%	30%	39%	39%	47%
C World of fantasy	62%	24%	63%	34%	49%	28%	60%	29%
D Prequel / sequel	24%	18%	14%	13%	11%	11%	18%	14%
E Star attraction	4%	5%	1%	1%	1%	3%	2%	3%
F Part of Tolkien's legend-world	67%	44%	61%	54%	72%	63%	66%	54%
G Multimedia franchise	4%	4%	4%	3%	3%	2%	4%	3%
H Family film	4%	4%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%
I Digital novelty cinema	17%	9%	16%	19%	15%	21%	16%	17%
J Action-adventure	21%	26%	19%	16%	14%	16%	19%	19%
K Peter Jackson movie	13%	10%	14%	11%	6%	10%	12%	10%
L Literary adaptation	24%	25%	23%	22%	23%	25%	24%	24%
M Stunning locations	29%	34%	26%	33%	31%	42%	28%	36%
N Coming-of-age story	10%	5%	5%	2%	8%	4%	7%	4%
O Hollywood blockbuster	15%	15%	14%	10%	6%	3%	13%	9%
Total respondents							844	544

\*Question: 'Which of the following labels come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three'

There are no noticeable differences between the labels preferred by men and women in either sample.

When asked about which genre labels they would *not* use about the *Hobbit* films, respondents in both samples agree overwhelmingly that the *Hobbit* films are not 'Children's stories' – this view is held by 69% of the ordinary cinema-goers and 70% of the fannish viewers. Along with this rejection of a children's appeal went the view that they are not

‘Family films’ either (a view held by 28% and 20% respectively). Many in both samples also agreed that the second-most inappropriate label is ‘Multimedia franchise’, a label that was explained in a clickable ‘floating definition’ to respondents who were unclear about this meaning as ‘Films that come out in series, with lots of merchandise and special releases’.

**Question 12: Have you taken part in any of these activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?**

In order to form an impression of the extent to which people are involved in activities related to the films in daily life, they were asked about such activities ranging from the production of fan art, and seriously engaging in debating the films, to collecting merchandise. The responses show significant differences between the two samples.

**Table 6:** Activities related to the films\*: Samples compared

	15 to 29 years		30 to 49 years		50 years or above		All	
	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota
A. Producing fan art	5%	-	1%	1%	-	-	2%	-
B. Blogging	4%	1%	1%	1%	-	-	2%	1%
C. Role-playing	5%	2%	5%	1%	-	-	4%	-
D. Writing fan fiction	2%	-	-	-	1%	-	1%	-
E. Collecting merchandise	10%	1%	1%	2%	2%	-	5%	-
F. Seriously debating	40%	15%	23%	7%	20%	7%	30%	9%
G. Commenting online	15%	9%	12%	3%	4%	2%	12%	4%
H. Gaming	20%	10%	9%	5%	4%	4%	13%	6%
I. Making fan videos	1%	1%	-	1%	-	-	-	1%
J. Visiting filming locations	2%	1%	3%	3%	1%	2%	2%	2%
K. None of these	49%	71%	66%	84%	75%	88%	60%	81%
Total respondents							844	544

\*Question: ‘Have you taken part in any of these activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?’ (multiple responses are possible)

81% of the ordinary cinema-goers have not engaged in any of the activities listed in the questionnaire, while 60% of the fannish respondents say that they have not taken part in any of these activities, meaning that 40% of them have. As shown in **Table 6**, the kinds of activities engaged in appear in the same ranking order for both samples, but have radically different volume: almost a third of the fannish respondents have seriously debated the films with others, 13% have engaged in gaming activities, and 12% have commented on the films in online fora. In comparison, the activity levels of the regular cinema-goers are almost negligible, with the exception of the fairly mundane cultural activity of debating the films with others (9%). Although the numbers are small, it should also be noticed that among the

fannish respondents 4% have participated in role-playing and 5% have collected merchandise – activities that display zero-engagement in the quota sample.

The very modest activity levels of the regular cinema-goers are almost exclusively carried by the young group, of whom 29% have been active in at least one respect. In the fannish groups it is both the young and to some extent the middle age groups who can boast a visible level of activity.

When considered in the light of the response patterns discussed above for motivations for seeing the films and for the genre label preferences, this appears to indicate that fandom may consistently have a levelling effect on the film-related views and activities between age groups, while there are systematic differences differentiating the age groups of ordinary cinema-goers.

There are no differences between men and women in these respects in either sample, with the slight exception that women with a fannish inclination are more prone to collect merchandise (8%) than their male counterparts (3%).

#### **Question 16: What did you think of the *Lord of the Rings* films overall?**

The figures show clearly that people's memory of the *LOTR* films positions these films as a much more enthusiastic experience ten years ago than their recent experience of *The Hobbit*. This is the case for both samples. In the answers to Question 1 (**Table 3**) we learned that around a third (31% of the quota sample and 40% of the convenience sample) found the *Hobbit* trilogy 'Excellent'. In their answers to Question 16 people tell us that the *LOTR* films were just so much better: In the quota sample almost half (47%) and in the convenience sample a massive two thirds (67%) thought that *LOTR* was 'Excellent'. Below these figures are supplemented with respondents' answers to the open, qualitative question about the merits and disappointments of the *Hobbit* trilogy, where respondents often give voice to their frustration by drawing explicit comparisons with their memory of the *LOTR* films.

The enchantment of *LOTR* is fairly uniform across the three age groups in both samples – around 45% in all quota sample age groups versus around 65% in all convenience sample groups. The gendered experiences of *LOTR* are almost identical with the sample averages.

#### **Question 17: Have you read *The Hobbit*?**

People's answers to Question 3 (**Table 4**) provided the insight that a third of the quota sample and nearly half of the convenience sample gave 'knew the book' as one of their main reasons for having 'to see what the films would be like'. This motivation is clearly dependent on whether people have read the book at all, and in the context of this study it is therefore interesting to establish how many respondents in each sample have actually read the book – and perhaps more than once. We first consider this issue across the samples, and then

proceed to analyze a cross-tabulation of how the reading, or not, of the book has affected two key dimensions of the film experience.

First of all, as we have already mentioned, the number of people who have read *The Hobbit* is astonishingly high in both samples (**Table 7**): In the quota sample 27% have read it once and 20% have read it more than once, which is probably exceptional for an international book title in Denmark. The aggregate of these two categories (47%), who have read the book once or more, is exceeded by the convenience sample's impressive aggregate of 67%, with 41% having read it more than once and 26% once.

Having read the book is naturally related to respondents' age. In the convenience sample, in the age group who have had some fifty years to accomplish this feat, almost two thirds have read it more than once (63%), but as many as a quarter (23%) of those who have had less than 30 years at their disposal can boast more than one read. It is clear that fandom can be seen as a causal driver behind this achievement, since the respondents in the quota sample do not reach such heights: 10% of the young group, 20% of the middle group, and 28% of the 50+ group have read *The Hobbit* more than once. The role played by chronological age for these patterns could be the reason why the levelling effect of fandom on the age groups' response patterns, which we could observe in the case of the motivational and preferential factors, does not occur for the response 'Read more than once'. However, there is a tendency for the levelling effect across fannish age groups to reappear for those who have just read the book once. As above, gender differences are almost non-existent.

**Table 7:** Reading *The Hobbit*\*: Samples compared

	15 to 29 years		30 to 49 years		50 years or above		All	
	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota
had it read to me	3%	7%	3%	5%	1%	2%	3%	4%
read once	28%	23%	24%	25%	24%	34%	26%	27%
read more than once	23%	10%	52%	20%	63%	28%	41%	20%
still reading	4%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%	2%
not read at all	27%	49%	19%	40%	9%	33%	20%	40%
planning to read	14%	9%	3%	8%	3%	3%	8%	6%
Total respondents							844	544

\*Question: 'Have you read *The Hobbit*?'

In addition to exploring how familiar people in the two samples were with *The Hobbit* in book form, we have analyzed through a cross-tabulation some of the ways in which the reading experience (or the lack of it) might have affected their overall experience and their motivations for seeing the films (**Table 8**). For this analysis we divided each sample into two groups: on the one hand, those who have read it once or more than once, including those

who have had it read aloud and those who indicate that they are currently reading it (called 'readers'); on the other hand those who have not read it (called 'non-readers').

In the quota sample, there is practically no difference between readers and non-readers with respect to rating the films overall as 'Excellent' (32% versus 28%). In the convenience sample it appears that readers are more likely to have been disappointed by the films than non-readers ('Excellence' ratings of 36% versus 43%).

Those who have read the book show the same motivational pattern across the two samples, although the frequencies are higher in the convenience sample (**Table 8**): In both samples, the top-3 reasons for having seen the films are loving Tolkien's work as a whole (C), knowing the book and having to see what the films would be like (I), and loving fantasy films generally (F). In the quota sample these three reasons are given by 69%, 59% and 32%, while the pattern in the convenience sample is 75%, 60% and 48%. Thus, interestingly, a general love of Tolkien's work (based also on, presumably, knowledge of the *Lord of the Rings* books and films) exceeds knowledge of the book as the most frequently offered motivation.

**Table 8:** Comparing motivations for viewing the film\* between readers and non-readers\*\*

	Have read the Hobbit		Have not read the Hobbit		All	
	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota	Convenience	Quota
B. I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films	17%	7%	20%	5%	17%	6%
C. I love Tolkien's work as a whole	75%	69%	39%	23%	67%	49%
F. I love fantasy films generally	48%	32%	50%	36%	49%	34%
I. I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like	60%	59%	1%	1%	48%	32%
Total respondents					844	544

\*Question: 'Please choose *up to three* reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films', \*\*Question: 'Have you read *The Hobbit*?'

The non-readers in the convenience sample are more anchored in the fantasy/Tolkien universe than the non-readers in the quota sample. Their fannish inclination shows in their top-3 rankings: 1. loving fantasy films generally (F, 50%), 2. liking to see big films when they come out (D, 43%), and 3. loving Tolkien's work as a whole (C, 39%), as opposed to the motivational pattern of non-readers of the quota sample: 1. liking to see big films when they come out (D, 42%), 2. loving fantasy films generally (F, 36%), and 3. having to see the films because of the build-up in the media (G, 27%). It is the latter set of reasons that tells us most validly, in a Danish context, what motivated Danish non-readers to go see the *Hobbit* movies.

We saw in **Table 6** above that 40% of the convenience sample, as opposed to 19% of the quota sample, had engaged in at least one of the listed activities in connection with the *Hobbit* films (see the response options in **Table 6**). The cross-tabulation with reading of the book shows that readers in both samples (convenience sample: 43%; quota sample 23%) are significantly more likely to have engaged in things like seriously debating the films and gaming than non-readers (convenience sample: 25%; quota sample: 13%), and again with a pattern of convenience sample respondents behaving more fannishly irrespective of having read the book or not. The only activity not encumbered by statistical uncertainty is 'seriously debating the films', where the convenience sample shows considerable activity (readers: 33%; non-readers: 16%), as opposed to the quota sample (readers: 15%; non-readers: 3%).

### **In their own words: comparing respondents' verbal reflections about their rating of *The Hobbit* films**

In order to explore processes of meaning-making at the micro-level in the two samples, we have looked into the two sets of qualitative responses to the first question in the questionnaire in which respondents were asked to sum up their response to the film in their own words. As already shown in **Table 3**, 50% of quota sample respondents thought the *Hobbit* films were 'good' and 31% thought they were 'excellent'; in the convenience sample, the total percentage of ratings of 'good' and 'excellent' is almost the same: 44% thought the films were 'good' and 40% thought they were 'excellent'.

If we understand 'fannish' to designate an intense emotional investment in and commitment to an object (Davis et al. 2016; Sandvoss 2005), the statistical analysis above defines two samples with different degrees of enthusiasm towards the film, of which one is more committed than the other. However, as Sandvoss points out, 'emotional intensity cannot be measured quantitatively' (Sandvoss, 2005: 6). Our question is, therefore, whether respondents' own explanations of their choice of top or second highest grading of the films differ too. Can we find any significant differences between answers to grading 'excellent' and 'good' and, moreover, is it possible to qualitatively support our thesis about a 'fannish' sample and a 'fan-neutral' sample among the Danish responses.

The Canadian/New Zealand *Hobbit* Audience Research team, Michelle, Davis, Hardy and Hight (2015) did an empirical study of prior expectations of the first *Hobbit* film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012) compared with post-viewing responses. They argue that two large pre-viewing groups, which they categorized as respectively 'LOTR fans' and 'Tolkien aficionados', could collectively be categorized as 'enchanted *Hobbit* fans' after having seen the first film (Michelle, Davis, Hardy and Hight, 2015; cf. also Davis, Michelle, Hardy and Hight, 2016). Just a minor part of the two pre-viewing groups turned into what the authors called 'disappointed Tolkien readers' after having seen the film – 'deeply disappointed by *AUJ*'s many deviations from the original work' (Michelle, Davis, Hardy and Hight, 2015: 12).

Michelle et al. were asking about the role of pre-figurative material for film experiences and their study was conducted before the second film in the trilogy came out. The World Hobbit Project was launched after the last part premiered. In comparison with Michelle et al.'s categorization, probably both the 'excellent' and 'good' respondents would be included in their 'enchanted Hobbit fan' category, as no Danish respondents in either of the two samples criticized the films to the extent that they considered themselves to be 'deeply disappointed'. However, the material showed different degrees of enchantment.

For our study we selected the free text responses corresponding with the 'excellent' and 'good' markings, which answered question two in the questionnaire, "Can you sum up your response to the films in your own words". For comparative purposes, we subdivided the two groups of answers ('good' and 'excellent') further into the two samples; then we condensed all answers, and guided by our knowledge of responses to the Lord of the Rings films, we coded the answers in accordance with a range of thematic reasons for liking the film ('excellent') or liking it a bit less ('good') as well as with clusters of evaluative terms. Moreover, we highlighted full answers we thought to be representative of a cluster of answers as well as evaluative terms which stood out in comparison to others.

In total, across the verbal responses of the two samples, where those who answered 'excellent' or 'good' made up 703 convenience sample responses and 441 quota sample responses, there were significant differences between the 'good' group and the 'excellent' group, even though some explanations of 'excellent' were similar to explanations found in the 'good' segment and vice versa. Verbal responses to 'excellent' were overall more enthusiastic than verbal responses to the 'good' category, and were without the reservations which were characteristic of 'good' responses.

Nevertheless, compared to the results of the analysis of the Danish free-text responses to the same question in the international *Lord of the Rings* audience project questionnaire, the recurrent impression was that the awestruck 'sacred viewing' found in that material (Jerslev, 2006) was not in the same manner an appropriate term to describe the reaction of the most enthusiastic *Hobbit* audiences. No doubt, respondents were enthusiastic when grading 'excellent'; they characterized the films as 'brilliant', 'spectacular', 'impressive', 'grandiose', 'thrilling', and so on. Respondents were praising the feeling of being immersed and absorbed ('drawn into', 'disappear into', 'being submerged into', 'being lost into') 'a universe' or 'another world' (again); they were praising the way Tolkien's book was adapted into three films and how the films added to the book; they noted with great pleasure that the films were wonderfully similar to the images respondents had stored in their memory after reading the book – some of them many years ago – and how they were able to recall those memories; they loved the story, the grand sceneries, the impressive detailed images made even more spectacular by 3D projection, and the spectacular world of fantasy as a whole, where in the words of one respondent 'they pull you into a world of sagas, adventure creatures, and an utterly fantastic story. The films are incredibly well made and all actors are completely engaged. You are absorbed by the story



and each time you are taken by surprise when the film ended that two and a half hours had passed that quickly'.<sup>15</sup>

However, after three *Lord of the Rings* films (2001, 2002 and 2003) and three *Hobbit* films (2012, 2013 and 2014), the feeling so predominantly expressed throughout the *Lord of the Rings* responses by the most enthusiastic respondents that their experience was unprecedented; that they had been overwhelmed and immersed into a world so wonderful and awe-inspiring, and so impressively crafted that they had never experienced anything like it before was missing in the *Hobbit* material. It had been replaced by the joy of re-visiting and the immense pleasure of once again being given the opportunity to have an unusually great filmic experience. In addition, we observe that compared to the *Lord of the Rings* responses, there was significantly less use of capital letters (almost none) and exclamation marks, which might be used to express feelings of excitement and pleasure (Jerslev, 2006).

A recurrent type of expression by respondents across the convenience and quota samples who graded the *Hobbit* films 'good' was praise followed by reservation. Many responses started with similar superlatives and the same enthusiastic wording used by the 'excellent' respondents but they then continued by adding a modification starting with adverbs like 'yet' or 'nevertheless', or conjunctions like 'but': 'A fantastic and beautiful work of film; but it changes a book for children into a film for adults'; 'a fabulous film about a world inhabited by fantasy creatures and the subtle Hobbits, but the narrative is too protracted'; 'fabulously made, great story - but a bit long'; 'fabulous scenery; yet I am a bit surprised that they made a very little book into three films'; 'the films were fabulous, despite the fact that much new stuff has been added to the book. I am disappointed over the third film, though. There was not much story, but great scenes anyway!!!'

Side by side with respondents' enthusiastic appraisals of the film, a substantial part of such reservations could be grouped into five different kinds of explanations:

1) The films were too long: 'Excellently made, but too long'; 'marvellous sceneries; yet I was surprised that the short book was made into three films'; 'ground-breaking technology and fabulous effects; wonderful fantasy in extended story, yet a bit protracted'.

2) They should have made two instead of three films, or: one or two of the three films were better than the other(s): 'Spectacular films, spectacular effects; but the story was too thinly scattered across the three films'; 'I was completely enthusiastic about the first film, which I thought was really, really suggestive, and marvellous and funny too. The second one didn't really get at me; it was far too occupied with action, as far as I remember it.' 'The two first films were almost perfect – they strike the perfect mix of fun and seriousness – which is what *The Hobbit* is like. The third film totally misses the point; it is a great film, but it has got nothing to do with *The Hobbit*'.

3) The *Lord of the Rings* films were better: ‘Exciting adventure films, but not as successful as the *Lord of the Rings* films’; ‘an obvious point of reference for most people is the *Lord of the Rings* films, and compared to these films, the *Hobbit* films are like butter spread too thinly over too much bread’; ‘one cannot repeat a success. *The Lord of the Rings* will forever be the most legendary films made by Peter Jackson’.

4) The use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) was too obvious and prevented the sought for immersion: ‘Visually impressive, yet at times somewhat exaggerated uses of CGI effects’; ‘Spectacular films, great acting, great design. Still, they are not like the *Lord of the Rings* films. Maybe too many scenes were a bit too ‘computer game action-ish’.

5) Scenes from the book were missing (in contrast to a range of ‘excellent’ responses where Jackson’s extensions made to the book were praised): ‘In my view the *Hobbit* trilogy is fantastic, which fits in very well with the original story; yet they miss important details, which may leave people who have not read Tolkien’s book with a lot of questions when leaving the theatre’.

Until now we have described the differences between respondents’ elaborations on their grading choices of ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ across the two samples. Even though respondents were of course all praising the film, given their top or second highest rating, and even though it could at times have been impossible to distinguishing between a ‘Good’ and an ‘Excellent’ answer had we not been able to compare with the numbered grade, there was a similar difference overall in degree of enthusiasm within both samples. There are clear indications that the top grading ‘excellent’ means high emotional investment and ‘good’ a somewhat less devoted investment. Given the difference in percentages of ‘excellent’ and ‘good’ responses, the labelling of the convenience sample as ‘fannish’ and the quota sample as ‘fan-neutral’ makes sense. But there is another interesting difference between the two samples, which may elucidate the sample descriptions by other means: overall, the two samples differed with respect to length of responses (**Table 9**).

**Table 9:** Average length of responses, word count

Average length of responses, word count	Convenience sample	Quota sample
Good	26.48 words (370 answers)	12.12 words (273 answers)
Excellent	21.06 words (333 answers)	19.00 words (168 answers)
Total answers	703	441

The Table shows that length of response is not in itself an expression of level of enthusiasm; convenience sample respondents grading 'good' used more words than the group of respondents grading 'excellent' and the reverse is the case for quota sample respondents. However, overall, quota sample respondents answered in much shorter phrases than convenience sample respondents. Moreover, the difference between the two samples is most pronounced for respondents' explanations of the 'good' classification.

Thus, convenience sample respondents used much longer arguments compared with quota sample respondents when explaining why they were not giving their experience top rating but only the second highest. They were more careful and detailed; for example, they explained in what ways they thought differently of each of the films, and they gave more examples of what they thought was good and impressive and what was a bit disappointing. In short, these respondents' appraisals as well as their reservations were elaborate. Accordingly, we suggest that the 'fannish' experience is not only to be found in the statistical findings and the choice of words of enthusiasm when describing the response to the film (the selection of which did not differ significantly from the quota sample responses). 'Fannish' may also be located in the mere length of responses.<sup>16</sup> Even though – or exactly because – respondents thought the film was 'good' but not 'excellent', describing the reason for their grade at length could be regarded as a way of maintaining a connection with the films, despite their reservations. In the particular context of a survey website solely dedicated to explaining what audiences thought of the film, a respondent's verbal explanation of his/her response to the film could be regarded as a means to hang on to, even in some sense repeat an experience which, though not excellent, was good enough.

## Conclusions and reflections

By conducting the two parallel, methodologically different studies of the experience of the *Hobbit* film trilogy among Danish viewers, we have generated two complementary sets of insights about the way a Hollywood blockbuster – albeit an exceptional one, given the intimate relationship between the *Hobbit* films, the *Lord of the Rings* films, and Tolkien's, for some, almost sacred literary fictional works.

Our study has thus provided some interesting answers to the central research question 'In what ways does something originating as an English children's story acquire meaning and value for different audiences across the world?', and to the five subsidiary questions quoted at the beginning of this article.

We found a considerable amount of agreement between the two samples about core aspects of the film experience, for instance about which genre labels the respondents find appropriate for the *Hobbit* films (**Table 5**). Another example of commonality derives from the question about which kinds of fannish activities respondents have engaged in (**Table 6**): here we found that underneath the difference that many more from the convenience sample have engaged in at least one of these activities (40%) than from the quota sample (19%), the kinds of activities engaged in follow the same rank order in both samples.

But there are also striking differences: When it comes to the reasons for seeing the films (**Table 4**), the convenience sample, which we have called *fannish*, is more fan-oriented: 17% overall, and 26% of the men in the convenience sample, say that they wanted to see the films because they are ‘connected to a community that has been waiting for the films’. But still four fifths of the convenience sample are not connected to such a well-defined fan grouping. The fannish audience in Denmark also tended to embrace *The Hobbit* trilogy more happily than the average cinema-goers of the quota sample, a pattern that can be traced to the ratings of female and young viewers.

The fan-neutral respondents (esp. men) in the quota sample for whom the Tolkien-oriented reasons *are* very salient are also more likely to be guided by motivations *not* associated with Tolkien, such as the more general reason to do with liking to see big new films when they come out, which is rated on a par with having read the book as a key motivation.

These survey findings are complemented by the insights obtained in the qualitative analysis of the respondents’ verbalized experience of the films, which are also characterized by the interplay of similarities and differences between the convenience and the quota samples. The respondents’ discourses in the two samples are characterized by quite similar lexical descriptors of enthusiasm as well as reservations about *The Hobbit* films, but these similarities are accompanied by very different argumentative stances that originate in fannish audiences feeling a more urgent need to provide elaborate reasons for their disappointment.

The comparative analysis of a fannish and a fan-neutral sample of Danes shows that often the differences between them has to do with the higher intensity of the fannish experience, which is thus not different in kind, so to speak, but in degree. While this difference is not surprising, we had not anticipated the finding on many questions that fandom tends to level out demographic differences (see the analyses of Question 3 and 4).

The lesson to be learnt on the basis of such insights, we suggest, is that if one’s understanding of people’s sense-making of a widely shared cultural phenomenon, such as a blockbuster film, relies only on a fannish sample, one would be led to believe that experiences across demographic boundaries are more homogeneous than they ‘really’ are in the national population.

A possible ‘Best practice’ for research relying on a convenience sample analysis would therefore be to include in the questionnaire questions for building solid knowledge about who the respondents are in relation to the sociocultural landscape: ensure that there are detailed questions for mapping the demographic composition of the sample produced, as well as other questions which can help paint a cultural portrait of the sample in thematically relevant respects (here: the respondents’ likely relative predilection for the filmic object under study). In spite of adopting such a strategy, however, one is still left with the conundrum of anchoring the convenience sample findings accurately in the sociocultural terrain (such as a country) of the study – something which a controlled, systematically recruited sample is better equipped to do.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The dictum is often attributed to the cultural anthropologist G. Swanson (1971), 'Frameworks for comparative research: Structural anthropology and the theory of action', in: I. Vallier (ed.), *Comparative Methods in Sociology: Essays on Trends and Applications*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>2</sup> This quote is taken from the invitation letter to prospective project participants from the project directors Martin Barker, Matt Hills, and Ernest Mathijs, 9 April 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Again, taken from the invitation letter to prospective Hobbit Project participants from the project directors Martin Barker, Matt Hills, and Ernest Mathijs, 9 April 2013.

<sup>4</sup> From the 'publicity hooks' document from the project directors, 29 October 2014.

<sup>5</sup> From the 'publicity hooks' document from the project directors, 29 October 2014.

<sup>6</sup> From the 'Publicity hooks' document from the project directors, 29 October 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For a list of the participating countries, see for example Barker, Egan, Jones & Mathijs 2008, note 39.

<sup>8</sup> The construction and initiation of the project is described in Egan and Barker, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Barker, Mathijs & Trobia (2008: 223) find clear differences between the main Internet sample and the sample of paper completions: Internet respondents are in general younger; the amount of students and professionals is relatively higher, Internet completers were more enthusiastic towards the films and they were in general more knowledgeable of Tolkien's work.

<sup>10</sup> For all world profile numbers see Barker and Mathijs 2008, appendix. Some but not all of the Danish numbers are published in Jerslev 2006

<sup>11</sup> We are grateful to the Webpol online market research company in Copenhagen for their constructive efforts to provide the quota sample data set for the comparative analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Our study is probably innovative in this respect. When we looked for precedents to inspire us in our comparative purpose, we could not find any in the literature. Concerned by this, we consulted an authoritative scholar with wide expertise in methodology issues, who did not know of any exact precedents, and stated that generally there exists very little work on different sampling strategies and their implications: 'I simply don't know of any research that compares sampling strategies in this way. (...) Clearly there is a gap in the literature' (Alan Bryman, personal communication).

<sup>13</sup> For reasons of space, we do not show the data for this point. Readers are welcome to contact the authors if they wish to see these data.

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<sup>14</sup> See the response options in the full questionnaire in the project directors' introduction to the special issue.

<sup>15</sup> All excerpts from the verbal responses have been translated by us.

<sup>16</sup> We are here not talking about different degrees of 'textual richness' related to vocabulary in a quantitative manner, which could for example be measured by Type Token Ratio (for an extended discussion of valid methods for the measuring of textual richness and a critique of Type Token Ratio, see Tweedie and Baayen 1998). We are more qualitatively suggesting that length of response may be regarded as both an expression of and a way of creating attachment to the films.